DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 270 524 UD 024 922

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TITLE Remarks on Social Inequality and Measured Cognitive Abilities in the Schools.
PUB DATE 84
NOTE 19p.
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Achievement Tests; Aptitude Tests; *Curriculum Development; *Disadvantaged; Elementary Secondary Education; *Equal Education; Intelligence Quotient; Learning Disabilities; Social Action; *Socioeconomic Status

ABSTRACT

The thesis of this paper is that social class profoundly affects performance on IQ, aptitude, and specific school learning abilities and disabilities tests, and that a fair, quantitative measurement of socioeconomically depressed students is only possible with local or comparable norms. The controversial issue in such testing of students is the resulting educational programming which is usually quite limiting for low social status students, many of whom become classified as learning disabled. Facts and myths about social inequality and schooling are discussed. It is concluded that political action to improve the quality of life for socioeconomically depressed adults will have greater and quicker effects on children's test scores than school reforms. A list of references is appended. (Author/CG)

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Remarks on Social Inequality and Measured Cognitive Abilities in the Schools

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Running head: SOCIAL INEQUALITY

Abstract

The thesis of this paper is that social class profoundly affects performance on IQ, aptitude, and specific school learning (dis)abilities tests; and that a fair quantitative measurement of socioeconomically depressed students is only possible with local or comparable norms. The most controversial issue regarding the testing of schoolchildren is resultant educational programming which is usually quite limiting for low social status youngsters, many of whom are now specially classified as learning disabled. Facts and myths about social inequality and schooling are discussed. The author believes that political action to improve the quality of life for socioeconomically depressed adults will have greater as well as quicker effects on their children's test scores than tinkering with school reforms.

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"Truth is more complex, multifaceted and value-determined than is the usual fact. Fact is empirical while truth is interpretative. Fact is, in itself, unrelated to value; it merely is. Truth, as the understanding - in the fullest sense - of fact, is related to value and, for that reason, more fully human."

Kenneth B. Clark (1965, p. xxiv)

Remarks on Social Inequality and Measured Cognitive Abilities in the Schools

Current concerns

Conclusive evidence has been gathered in a number of states on the overrepresentation of black and Hispanic children in public school classes for the mild or educable mentally retarded (EMR). In 1979, landmark cases in California (Larry P. v. Wilson Riles) and Mississippi (Mattie T. et al. v. Charles E. Holliday et al.) highly publicized the extent of the problem, although an important but less well known study by the Massachusetts Advocacy Center (1978) preceded the resolution of the infamous litigation. Officials with the New Jersey State Department of Education, reacting to the legal ramifications, researched - as education officials in other states probably did as well - and had the courage to document and distribute their findings (Manni, Winikur, & Keller, 1980). The NJ situation, of which this author is most familiar, turned out to be rather serious as is well explained below in an article from the popular press.

> Although there are four times as many white children as blacks in New Jersey's schools, black children are four times more likely to be placed in classes for mildly retarded students. New Jersey officials, in announcing plans Friday to eliminate the disproportionate racial imbalance in special education programs, also said Hispanic children

> are three times more likely than whites to be assigned to the special classes. The placement of as many as 5,500 of the more than 10,000 children who have been labeled as "educable mentally retarded" has been questioned. Public Advocate Stanley Van Ness and Education Commissioner Fred Burke said a recent analysis of students classified as "educationally handicapped" will serve as a guide for correcting placement practices in more than 600 school districts. The analysis was made by a task force of representatives of both departments. Van Ness said placement disparities for the mentally retarded were largely the result of reliance by school districts on I.Q. tests which have been ruled discriminatory by the federal courts. ("Racial Balance Eyed," 1981, p. A3)

To avoid legal problems, guidelines for the EMR classification have been revised. The major changes being a lowered IQ cut-off point (often going from 77 to 69 in most states) and the consideration of "adaptive" social functioning in addition to IQ. As a result of this, both the total number and the percentage of minority students classified EMR has decreased sharply (United States Department of Education, 1983).

School battles were fought in the courtroom successfully in the late 1970s and early 1980s which curtailed the use of the EMR label with all its negative self-image and economic ramifications for students. Even earlier, as a result of federal legislation from the impetus of previous litigation, some less restrictive special educational programming was available (Sigmon, 1983a). We must not, however, grow complacent in the glory of previous victories for there is a new education war about to burst forth with fury in the mid-1980s (McKnight, 1982). Many of those children formerly classified

as EMR are now considered in some quarters to have "specific learning disabilities," and are being labeled as such (U.S. Department of Education, 1983). So instead of having a pervasive mild cognitive problem, a child's learning difficulty is often today seen as being in just one or more specific areas by many educational diagnosticians - primarily those trained in the learning disabilities orientation over the past decade or two. The rationale for the alleged mild educational handicapping condition has changed, but it is still supposedly caused from something within the child who gets blamed for what usually is a social or school finance problem in terms of remedial program funding (Sigmon, in press). This is not meant to be construed that there are no learning disabilities of actual neurological genesis, these do exist. What we must be sceptical of is the increasing number of American schoolchildren who are now formally classified as having specific learning disabilities which was almost 1 2/3 million as of the 1981-82 schoolyear - the last year for which a full count is available (U.S. Dept. of Education, 1983). The implications, of course, are not necessarily better for the minority child despite the more palatable label (Collins & Camblin, Jr., 1983).

Whatever the special education rubric used or the educational status derived, tests administered to 'scientifically' substantiate labels will almost always be unfair to the socioeconomically depressed child, regardless of his/her race or ethnicity; and no matter how culturally fair the test appears (Sigmon, 1983b). Johnson (1969) earlier warned us about the "emotionally disturbed" and "socially maladjusted" labels for "inner city" students. Schools act as a sorting mechanism and have not served as the 'great social equalizer' because of unequal opportunity both before and upon finishing. "The relationship of measured intelligence to socio-economic level is one of

the best documented findings in mental-test history" (Tyler, 1965, p. 336). Make no mistake, whether looking at global IQ scores, specific school-related learning (dis)abilities, or "college readiness tests" (the author's phrase for college aptitude examinations), the culturally different minorities who are often socioeconomically depressed in racist American society and the white poor will always fare worse as a group when compared to more affluent students. Perhaps nothing could more dramatically point up the role of the school as a social sieve than to examine some figures about the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT). The SAT is administered by a company known as the Educational Testing Service and is the most widely used American college admissions test. Table 1, below, is adapted from a booklet by The College Entrance Examination Board (1974).

Insert Table 1 about here

The SAT score is strongly considered by various colleges to whom the pupil seeks admission, and acceptance is often dependent upon the SAT cut-off point established by the particular college. Based on the figures in Table 1, one would need only know a high school senior's family income range to predict with a high level of confidence the probable test outcome. This most clearly is a blatant case of social class bias.

Social inequality: Myths and reality

In order to fully understand social inequality, the concepts of social class and stratification need to be analyzed - the latter first. Social stratification implies the existence of social inequality and a hierarchy of

societal levels, e.g., social classes. Blumberg (1972) points out that in America there are two pervasive but powerful myths that go side by side: American society is classless and that if persons have talent and determination they can get to the top; and yet the myths are patently contradictory, for if there is no hierarchy of classes, then there is obviously nothing to get to the top of. Karl Marx was instrumental in pointing out the importance of social classes when studying societies more than 125 years ago. Max Weber discussed stratification in terms of status, power, and class around the turn of the century, emphasizing that class affects one's "life chances in the market place." If one believes that America is a land of "equal opportunity" and "free enterprise" (this writer and probably most serious students of our society believe that both are myths), then hard work plus intelligence and some luck should be all it takes to make it big in America, and that those who fail are lazy, stupid, and probably constitutionally defective because of heredity. There are numerous but evasive opportunities for many but not all. Free enterprise is only for those with the capital. The financial success of a few extraordinarily talented individuals reinforces the myth of the "American dream." This author also believes America is a "closed-class system." Yet simultaneously there appears to be an "open-class ideology" in operation which helps maintain the superstructure of the American system. If a society were really open there would be vertical social mobility between social classes. Besides the American dream myth, the notion of freedom keeps a closed American society going. Although there are constraints on freedom to Americans, it definitely exists here. However, economic freedom is ultimately more important than political freedom in the USA. Even though every person has only one vote despite one's wealth it is the wealthy and therefore the powerful who present

the limited political choices in terms of which politician/candidates are chosen and what issues are voted upon. Briefly, in America there is limited political freedom and less economic freedom.

The British sociologist Basil Bernstein (1960) has developed a theory of language dealing with "linguistic differences [which he refers to as "codes"], other than dialect," that are transmitted via social class. Bernstein's theory is obviously biased in favor of the middle-class and is another explanation of why these schoolchildren do better in school than those of the "lower working class." He wrote:

> It is suggested that the typical, dominant speech mode of the middle class is one where speech becomes an object of special perceptual activity and a 'theoretical attitude' is developed towards the structural possibilities of sentence organization. This speech mode facilitates the verbal elaboration of subjective intent, sensitivity to the implications of separateness and difference, and points to the possibilities inherent in a complex conceptual hierarchy for the organization of experience. It is further suggested that this is not the case for members of the lower working class. The latter are limited to a form of language-use which although allowing for a vast range of possibilities, provides a speech form which discourages the speaker from verbally elaborating subjective intent and progessively orients the user to descriptive, rather than abstract, concepts. (p. 271)

Bernstein's notion about working-class linguistic differences is based upon his British experience. This author believes that even if his position were true in England - which is doubtful - it surely is not valid in America because: (i) the form of the language used does not indicate an inability to think in

in the abstract regardless of what biased 'measures' he provides as proof; (ii) his arguments are really grounded more in social acceptability than anything else; and, (iii) the flexibility, adaptability, and creativity of the poor or minority oral language later become incorporated into mainstream speech as an acceptable idiom and eventually into literary form. Offered, for example, is the phrase "rip-off." Bernstein's theory is functional at best, and Entwisle (1970) found:

> contrary to expectation, that slum children are apparently more advanced linguistically than suburban children at first grade....The superiority is short-lived, however, for by third grade, suburban children, whether blue collar or upper middle class, have surpassed the inner city children. (p. 14)

Taking the viewpoint that school is geared today more toward suburban/middle-class children, this is not surprising. The problem of language for black minority students, for example, is nicely explained through an understanding of "Ebonics" (Williams, 1975) for which the reader should see for further explication of this topic.

Some writers have proclaimed that social class differences are diminishing and social class is no longer a useful concept in the analysis of American society (Nisbet, 1959), or that Western societies are becoming increasingly classless (Goldthorpe, Lockwood, Bechhofer, & Platt, 1967); but Blumberg (1972) contends these authors gloss over some important areas and that inequalities which remain are significant enough so that social class continues to be one of the most powerful analytical instruments available to the sociologist.

Perhaps even more important than social class per se for studying educational

problems is the contemporary concept known as socioeconomic status (SES). This passage taken from Boocock (1980) explains why SES is perhaps the key concept when looking at variables that affect schooling:

> The family characteristic that is the most powerful predictor of school performance is socioeconomic status (SES): the higher the SES of the student's family, the higher his or her academic achievement. This relationship has been documented in countless studies and seems to hold no matter what measure of status is used (for example, occupation of principal breadwinner, family income, parents' education, or some combination of these). It holds with a variety of achievement/aspiration variables, including grades, achievement test scores, retentions at grade level, course failures, truancy, suspension from school, dropout rates, college plans, and total amount of formal schooling. It also predicts academic honors and awards, elective school offices, extent of participation in extracurricular activities, and other indicators of "success" in the informal structure of the student society. It holds, moreover, even when the powerful variables of ability and past achievement are controlled. Finally, the relationship between family SES and academic achievement has been found in virtually every Western society for which empirical evidence is available. (p. 40)

Richard de Lone (1979) further accentuates this while looking more specifically at chances for higher education.

> School performance - grades and test scores - substantially correlate with the SES of a student's family....The higher the student's social status, the higher the probability that he or she will get high grades. Similarly, the higher the grades and test scores, the more likely an individual from

any SES is to get more schooling. (p. 102)

Mr. de Lone credits Jencks et al. (1972) with the idea that higher education admits students on the basis of grades and test scores and in part because those who do well in school develop a taste for more schooling.

Conclusion

Professionals working in the schools must expect to see poor children as a group score lower on tests with national norms. More leeway has to be accorded a lower SES child before placement in a slow track, a retarded class, or a program for the learning disabled is considered. Hence, local norms are necessary and no school test instrument is valid without competent interpretation, especially in the area of knowing where certain tests have built-in biases and for whom (see Williams, 1972).

The educational community needs to insure that children have developed learning strategies before they are expected to develop subject or task proficiency. Since it is a well documented fact that poor children lag behind the more affluent academically and this writer believes it is not because of intelligence, they are, among other things, probably less well prepared. Bloom (1980) talks about "cognitive entry characteristics." He says these are the specific knowledge, abilities, or skills that are essential prerequisites for the learning of a particular school subject or a particular learning task. It is important that someone so influential as Bloom should emphasize this; but these prerequisites have for years been called study or readiness skills. Boocock (1980) directly addresses the issue of the middle-class having the mental tools and preparedness for school.

> The middle-class family is usually better able to provide the books, play materials, trips to zoos and farms, and other stimuli that prepare them for the student role, and they may even provide coaching in school related skills and tasks. (p. 77)

Society as a whole is the major problem with education, not the methods used or the tests administered. The problem is situational. How can a child who lives in squalor be expected to care about school? How can even a master teacher motivate a classroom of students who cannot foresee any personal future benefits from formal education? Band-aid measures of social reform have not really helped very much to improve educational opportunity or decrease the number of socially disenfranchised poor over the past 150 years in America (de Lone, 1979). Bowles and Gintis (1976) contend that more revolutionary change of the entire social order in the form of a redistribution of wealth is necessary before any real improvements can be made. There are many inequities within our society that need changing. Institutions which are unjust must be changed. Institutions have a way of perpetuating themselves, and changing them will improve society. Nothing will have as great a positive influence on child development as better living conditions, which requires changing the social structure itself. When this happens, educational performance in general and test taking "ability" in particular will improve. This change must be done through politics.

It is within the complex arena of schooling where the intricacies of the closed American society are most telling. A major aspiration of the poor is that their progeny should have better lives than themselves, and their hopes for this rest in the educational institutions. Yet there are a number of contemporary social critics who claim research shows that: the quality

of schooling per se is not an effective means of equalizing income (Jencks et al., 1972), socioeconomic status (SES) more than anything else most clearly predicts school success plus years of schooling (Boocock, 1980), the type of schooling a student receives is determined by social class (Jencks & Riesman, 1968), and more prestigious schooling goes to high SES students who in turn get the more desired credentials that schools offer (Lasch, 1975) - all combining to perpetuate the closed system.

The public schools teach that royalty does not exist in America. Also taught is that America is a land of freedom and opportunity which is true to some extent. America is, however, a closed society with stratified social classes and this fact is rarely a part of the public school curriculum. It is true that the more wealth one has in America the more comfortably one can live and the more freedom one gains - this is a well recognized fact. Most poor parents do realize the difficulty for their offspring to gain admittance to prestigious professional schools, such as for medicine; but this writer doubts that they realize just how minuscule their youngsters' chances really are - as was poignantly demonstrated via Table 1.

Since the present educational system has not opened American society, either a massive restructuring of the educational system or a tremendous boost in income for the poor seems necessary (de Lone, 1979). Either way it requires a redistribution of wealth away from those who currently are rich to those who are not. The problem, though, is that those affluent persons who are in the best positions to do this would not want to do it. They must be persuaded to do so, and by so doing will make Grier and Cobbs' (1968) words from their chapter entitled "The promise of education" for all American students less depressing:

But the black man who has breached so many barriers to achieve academic success must at this writing realize that further doors are open to all save him. His is a blind alley. His achievements are circumscribed by the same impediments of discrimination as are those of his less gifted brother. (pp. 149-150)

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TABLE 1[1]

Parental Annual Income by SAT Average for 647,031 (1973-4) Respondents[2]

Students' SAT Scores	Students' Mean Family Income
750-800	$24,124
700-749	21,980
650-699	21,292
600-649	20,330
550-599	19,481
500-549	18,824
450-499	18,122
400-449	17,387
350-399	16,182
300-349	14,355
250-299	11,428
200-249	8,639
Total Mean Soore: 462	Total Mean Income: 17,563

[1]Adapted from The College Entrance Examination Board (1974), Table 21, p. 27; and very similar to a table in de Lone (1979), p. 102.

[2]This table is derived from the students (647,031) who responded to the optional parent annual income question on the SAT application form. Registered for this test were 1, 045,273; while 985,247 students actually took it during the 1973-4 schoolyear.

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